

## “WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE IN THE LIGHT?”

Date: December 10, 2006

Text: Luke 3: 7-16

More so than ever, I have been struck this year by the contrast between our society's celebration of Christmas and the drama of the Bible. All the holiday shows on TV, and most of them seem to be on cable, have Tim Allen-like heroes. Everything is sugarplums and dancing fairies. The mood for Advent in the New Testament is quite different. Our scripture readings for the first Sunday of Advent spoke of the coming kingdom of God and the need to get ready. The story, then, moves on to a manger that nobody cared about in an obscured town called Bethlehem.

Nowhere is the contrast between “I'm dreaming of a white Christmas” mentality and the Biblical story more striking than in the role of John the Baptist. John can only be described as a wild man. He lived out in the desert, existing on locust and honey and wearing animal skins. He stood in a long line of prophets who felt called by God “to tell it like it is” and challenged people to return to the true relationship with their Creator.

John's message was simply: “REPENT! Do a 180 turn and change those thoughts and actions that are displeasing to God.” Can you imagine one of the Salvation Army bellringers standing outside Martin's clanging his bell and telling people who were entering the store “don't be guilty of gluttony by buying too much; watch out if you are going to stock up on beer; who is that with you? It better be your wife.” It wouldn't be very long, I suspect, before the Salvation Army found its holiday contributions were way down.

The people who came out into the wilderness to hear John asked him a very dangerous question: **WHAT SHALL WE DO** in responding to your message? Some of us have found out just how perilous it can be when we begin to shape our lives around what God wants us to do. Anne Dillard has written about Christians taking Christmas too casually. She describes church people in worship as children who assume that they are playing around with a chemistry set, but who are actually mixing up a batch of TNT. It is madness, she maintains, to wear pretty hats when we need crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. It sounds extreme but Ms. Dillard may have been listening to John the Baptist and be closer to the true spirit of Christmas than most realize.

We say that Christmas is a time for giving. That is absolutely correct but John provides a yearly reminder that the type of giving that God seeks in response to the birth of His Son may go far beyond what we normally assume when we rush out to the mall to do some more shopping.

Do we dare to ask as we prepare for Christmas this very Biblical question: **WHAT SHALL WE DO?** John called for a moral revitalization that begins within one's self and then spreads out! Interestingly enough, it would appear on the surface that John's message is “music to the ears” for many Americans. They are tired of someone stealing a small child's bicycle, of the news about sexual predators or all the shenanigans that go on in Albany and Washington. The cry seems to be “Yes, let's have some changes.”

But do the American people including us want the change to begin where it does in the Bible and that is with our personal habits and lifestyle? John, in a subtle twist, took away part of the comfort zone when he told his listeners not to assume that just because they claimed Abraham as an ancestor that they had no need for repentance. The warning applies equally well to middle and upper class Christians in our day who often share the same type of complacency. Often our trend of thought assumes that change should begin with the “bad” people we see on the TV News. It's not only John the Baptist warning people about becoming too self satisfied in their faith but Jesus picked up on the same message when he chastised the Pharisees, the most religious people of his day, for assuming they had it made.

John's approach is challenging if change is to begin with you and me. He didn't call for people to leave their jobs or their homes or anything radical in that sense but all are to share generously with the poor and all are to have high ethical principles. The tax collector is challenged to practice his profession with honesty and integrity and the same for the soldier. For us this means that our response to Christmas is shaped in a very individualistic manner. It may look different for the student, the parent, the retiree but all are to take seriously the call to treat others with respect and to seek justice.

Do some of you remember the “Murphy Brown” TV show? I was not a fan but one time I caught an evening where Jim Diehl, the older announcer, declared that he had a deep, dark secret. Everybody was fascinated and speculation ran rampant in the newsroom. Finally he decided to go public with the information on his next broadcast. Everybody waited anxiously for his hidden side to be revealed. He told the public that his secret was that he has been married to the same person for over twenty years, never had sex with another woman, loved his parents and so on. The implication was obvious: such behavior appears quite radical given the content of most TV shows.

That TV segment of “Murphy Brown” came to mind when I was thinking about our morning text and John the Baptist. Maybe like Jim Diehl we are to proclaim what might seem like odd values but which bring out the best in others and us. That might mean that teenagers don’t give up their virginity just because they think everyone else seems to be doing it; it might mean that people in their 20’s and 30’s don’t deal with life’s difficulties by using alcohol and drugs; it might mean that middle-aged people find ways to use time and money to help others; and in retirement we proclaim that a great gift has been given to us and we will do more than eat our way through all the restaurants in Florida. Does that sound too harsh a judgment? I suspect it might be close to John’s message if he were to return in 2006.

Do you see why I said at the beginning that the Biblical story doesn’t unfold like the latest Tim Allen Santa Claus movie that is currently showing in theatres around the area? Serious evaluation is necessary if we are to live in the Light of the Christ-Child. The meaning of Christmas, however, is such that we do not strive alone. John assured us that in coming to Bethlehem we journey with other pilgrims and together will receive the power to move toward a new level of existence. The closer we get to Bethlehem the better we shall feel about ourselves, the more we will care about others around us and the greater our concern for those who are suffering injustice.

Ann Weems has written:

If there is no cross in the manger  
    There is no Christmas  
If the Babe doesn’t become an adult  
    There is no Bethlehem star  
If there is no commitment in us  
    There are no wise men searching  
If we offer no cup of cold water,  
    There is no gold, frankincense, no myrrh.  
If there is no spirit of alleluia,  
    There are no shepherds watching.  
If there is no standing up, no speaking out, no risk  
    There is no Herod, no flight to Egypt.  
If there is no room’ in our inn  
    Then “Merry Christmas” mocks the Christ Child.  
If Christmas is not NOW,  
    If Christ is not born into the everyday present  
    Then what is all the NOISE about?